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AUTHOR Koncel, Mary A.; Carney, Debra
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a writing program designed for graduate students at the Smith College School for Social Work, and also a research project undertaken to identify and analyze the distinctive writing needs of this graduate school population. A major finding was that, although faculty understand the importance of argument and identify it as the skill most lacking in students, many students do not understand argumentation's central role in this discourse world. The curriculum in social work at Smith College is writing intensive, requiring a large number of papers each year along with a Master's thesis, making writing performance an acute need. The writing program includes numerous workshops and plentiful opportunities for individual conferences on drafts. For the study, questionnaires were sent to 120 randomly selected members of the School of Social Work community divided into 3 groups consisting of: (1) 60 social work students from the classes of 1933 and 1992 respectively; (2) 30 social work alumnae from the classes of 1990 and 1991; and (3) 30 full- and part-time faculty members. A 25% response rate was received from each group. Results showed that students who used the writing service did so for a variety of reasons, including lack of confidence. Faculty identified elements of argument, including a clear thesis supported by documented evidence, but only one student noted argument as important. Three of four students felt that writing counseling improved their work. Faculty showed a mixed response about whether course work prepares students for their professional careers. The important fact that students seem to be unaware of the need for clear argumentative skills should be addressed by educators. Workshops for faculty can stress the value of teaching argument in both their assignments and their responses to student writing. (HB)

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WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE: NEGOTIATING BETWEEN ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL DISCOURSE IN A GRADUATE SOCIAL WORK PROGRAM

ED349573

Mary A. Koncel and Debra Carney
Smith College
Center for Academic Development
Seelye 20
Northampton, MA 01063

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, we will describe the writing program we designed for Smith College School for Social Work students and a research project we undertook to examine the distinctive writing needs of this graduate school population. Our major finding is that although faculty understand the importance of argument in academic and professional social work writing and identify it as that skill most lacking in their students, many students do not understand its central and essential role in this discourse world. Instead, students believe that mastery of specialized language and format is the key to successful writing in both their professional and academic work. The results of our study have clarified our role in the future. First, as writing instructors, we must enter students' discourse world and learn the language of their discipline as well as what motivates their work. Second, we must not limit our work to students. We need to serve as a conduit between students and faculty, enabling both groups to use a common language in furtherance of their central goal: successful social work arguments.

During the academic year, from September to May, we are Writing Counselors at the Center for Academic Development at Smith College, a women's liberal arts college. At the Center, we teach writing primarily to undergraduates by means of individual conferences. Our pedagogy is based on the philosophy that all writers benefit from an audience which can address not only the specific writing issues evident in a particular paper, but also the characteristic patterns in their writing.

In 1988, the Smith School for Social Work, a coeducational graduate school, asked us to design a comprehensive program to address the writing needs of a diverse student population. As Golding and Mascaro (167) documented, a growing number of American graduate programs have begun providing some form of writing instruction to their students, suggesting to the authors that "either many graduate schools find that the undergraduate degree has prepared their students inadequately for more demanding written work, and they wish to correct that problem; or the schools feel that graduate work requires a particular kind of writing in which they have a responsibility to offer instruction" (170). The Smith School for Social Work recognized that its diverse student population brings diverse writing skills and preparation to the program.

At the School for Social Work, students work toward the Master of Social Work (MSW) degree in three summer sessions; each session has two, five-week semesters. From September to May, students are assigned to different social service placements all over the nation and in Canada.

The School for Social Work is highly selective, accepting only one in five applicants. Our students come from a wide variety of academic majors; some have recently received their undergraduate degrees while others have worked in a range of professions for many years before pursuing graduate work. These professions include law, economics, nursing, technical writing, and, of course, human service.

Students describe the curriculum as writing intensive and for good reason: each academic year, they produce about 15 papers, ranging from short applications of theory to lengthy diagnoses of hypothetical clients. Also, the Smith School for Social Work is one of only a few of the 89 accredited American social work programs to require an original thesis based on theoretical research or empirical studies. Obviously, the need for advanced writing performance is acute.

Although most of our students have demonstrated the skills necessary for both successful undergraduate and previous professional writing, we believe that the School for Social Work presents new writing challenges for many. Students are sometimes daunted by the volume of writing they must produce in such a short period of time. Perhaps more importantly, they must enter and master the discourse world of psycho-social theory--a complex and unfamiliar world for many (including their two writing teachers). Complicating mastery of this discourse world is a tension in the field of social work: is it a knowledge-based or values-based profession?

No matter how social workers ultimately resolve this tension, we believe that a unique feature of social work writing is that practioners assess their writing skills in terms of how their writing affects not only their careers but also the lives of their clients. Remember that social workers' reports help determine whether someone keeps or loses a child, receives special medical or psychological aid, serves a shorter prison sentence. Social work writing, therefore, has serious, tangible consequences. From the beginning, these social work requirements and responsibilities informed the program we developed.

In 1988, the first year of our program, we offered workshops which introduced our services to most members of the entering class. This was followed by individual writing conferences. All told, we had 60 conferences that summer. By the summer of 1991, we held 393 conferences and taught writing workshops which focussed on issues such as grammar and mechanics, editing, and overcoming writer's block. In addition we gave three faculty presentations on our services and ways faculty can use them, and we were also

asked to work with a class which requires students to turn their theses into publishable articles.

Since its inception, our program has experienced dramatic growth which we equate with success. And we know that a key component of this success has been the tremendous support from the faculty and administration--a support which is rooted in their understanding that writing is the best way to facilitate learning and maintain the highest standard of the institution and the profession. Golding and Mascaro affirm this belief when they state that "writing is an integral part of advanced research. Instruction in writing is instruction in thinking ... and a central part of a student's graduate/professional training" (177).

SURVEY STRATEGY AND METHODOLOGY

After four years of working with School for Social Work students, we wanted to identify and analyze more accurately their writing tasks, patterns and needs. We sought to assess how these tasks, patterns and needs have and should shape our writing program and pedagogy.

For our study, we sent questionnaires to 120 members of the School for Social Work community selected through random sampling. The participants were divided into three groups which were diverse in age, gender and race. The first group consisted of 60 School for Social Work students from the first and second year classes (1993 and 1992 respectively), the second group consisted of 30 School for Social Work alumnae/i from the classes of 1990 and 1991, and the final group consisted of 30 full and part-time faculty. Sampling of both the faculty and student groups was stratified using the criterium of counselor use (50 percent using us and 50 percent, to our knowledge, not using us.) We received a 25 percent response rate from each group.

RESULTS

The background profiles of our student users and non users are similar. There is no significant difference in their undergraduate or professional backgrounds, their grade point averages, or the amount or type of writing they have been doing prior to entering the Smith School for Social Work. Interestingly, we found that first and third year students used us the most; second year students, those in what has been described as the "cake walk or easy year" hardly used us at all.

The first group of our survey questions concerned who used us and

why. Students who didn't use us responded by explaining that they felt confident about their writing, lacked the extra time they felt they needed to use us, and subtly suggested that their writing wasn't "bad enough" to warrant coming to our center. A number of respondents said that if they had time, they would have used us and definitely planned to use us for their thesis year.

Students who used our services stated they did so for a range of reasons, which included writing process, use of the specialized language of their field, format and style, and grammar and mechanics. A large majority stated that they lacked confidence in their writing skills and sought affirmation from us.

Faculty who referred students to us, did so when their students had problems, but they did not specifically identify the nature of those problems.

A second set of questions asked what were the most important but difficult skills social work writers needed to acquire. Students identified writing concisely, following a particular format, and using the correct "jargon." Only one student, a non-user, indirectly brought up the importance of argument in social work writing: [A social worker must] "observe phenomena, describe same and not uncommonly...try to prove [a] point of view or come to a conclusion by analyzing what you observe."

However, the majority of our faculty respondents emphasized that good social work writing needed a clear thesis supported by documented evidence and theory and not personal and emotional preferences. Interestingly, a majority of the faculty felt that argument was the skill that students had the most difficulty mastering. One respondent noted that students lack:

> ...the ability to identify one key point to be made and then to organize an argument or presentation to make the point or points. The biggest problem they appear to have is logically defending a position. Most students come to the School for Social work without a research background and are therefore unskilled in this approach. I suspect though that some often have had problems in undergraduate work as well.

Another concurred, stating that students "have difficulty in organization and in grasping the general approach to writing theses. Until they become accustomed to the style, they tend to argue from feeling rather than fact."

A third set of questions assessed how students' academic experience, which includes their assignments and our writing counseling, aided their academic and professional writing. One

question focussed on the relationship between classroom assignments and professional writing. The majority of our student user and non-user respondents said their assignments did help prepare them for their professional work because the assignments required them to "think psychologically and diagnostically and to integrate theory and practice." Also, they admitted, the sheer volume of their academic writing made their professional writing a more routine task.

All of the respondents who used our services stated that writing counseling helped their academic writing. Specifically, they noted that writing counseling validated their confidence in their writing, helped them see that writing is a process, and aided them in selecting appropriate language and "jargon." Three students mentioned that we enabled them to identify their writing tasks and focus their topics, but only one mentioned that we aided in the clarification of argument.

Approximately, three quarters of our respondents believe that writing counseling helped their professional writing. One respondent wrote, "It made me see that all writing is a process and that many intermediary steps, some in false directions, are part of that process." Others noted that the confidence and skills they gained by using our service carried over to their professional writing tasks. The few who believed our writing counseling wasn't useful for their professional writing stated that they were too concerned about getting through their course work to "think about their professional writing."

Faculty had a mixed response to a question asking whether course work prepared students for their professional careers. A few felt it did, as this respondent wrote:

> The different kinds of assignments they encounter, such as case summaries and the thesis, are designed directly for use as graduate professionals. Other types, such as journals, letters and commentaries, are designed to help them get in touch with or develop or elaborate their thoughts or feelings about the content.

Other faculty thought there was little connection between course work and professional writing. According to another respondent, "that is more likely to take place in the field."

Faculty described in much detail how our work with students on organization and argument enabled them to better meet their academic demands, and by extension, their professional writing challenges. One wrote, "writing counselors have assisted students in better organizing their papers and using writing as an effective form of communication."

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Perhaps our most important finding came when we compared what faculty members identified as the most important and difficult skill for students to master with the skills students identified as being the most important and difficult. As noted earlier, faculty stressed a student's need to formulate an argument; the students believe they struggle with conciseness, jargon, and format. We see an significant discrepancy here.

The School for Social Work students who responded to our survey can identify the unique stylistic characteristics of social work writing, but they don't uniformly recognize the central position of argument in both their academic and professional writing. At this point, we suspect that faculty aren't viewing or framing their assignments as arguments. Our suspicions are somewhat confirmed because many faculty stated that there wasn't much of a connection between their students' academic and professional writing with the exception of the student's thesis. However, an examination of their pre-thesis writing, which is similar to much of their professional writing, reveals the necessity for argument. For example, both students and professionals must evaluate clients and argue for specific diagnoses and treatment plans based on those clients' presenting symptoms.

We also see a possible connection between this finding and the fact that we see so few second year students. Students tend to use us at what they perceive as transitional times in their program. First year students need assistance transitioning from either professional or undergraduate or no writing background into the discourse world of academic social work. On the other hand, third year students are transitioning from structured classroom and placement assignments to the rigors of independent research and writing. We are beginning to view this pattern as problematic.

Both of these transitional periods require that students develop increasingly sophisticated skills in focusing and structuring an argument using the highly specialized language of their field in the concise style required of the discipline. Students experience much stress and anxiety as they tackle these tasks and found discussions about the draft process and its potential for alleviating their stress and improving their skills helpful--although they were skeptical at first. However, too many students fail to understand that moving from first year work to their thesis is a continuum. They seem to believe that once completing their first year work, they have insured success for their second and third year course work. But, when they confront the thesis process, they have difficulty because they believe they need a

completely different set of writing skills.

Jeffrey Jeske, commenting on the Golding and Mascaro study, notes that graduate writing instruction performs "a vital function of training students both in the conventions and formats of their disciplines and also in the qualities of argumentation unique to their fields" (3). For the future, one of our primary goals is to make both faculty and students more aware that argument is a fundamental rhetorical principle in their discipline.

Because students acknowledge that writing skills mastered in one discourse world are transferable to another, we want to continue emphasizing in our writing conferences this cumulative gain. However, because we want students to recognize that most social work writing is argument, we will start identifying and articulating this rhetorical principle as it occurs in each assignment. In her description of the graduate writing course she designed for UCLA education students, Susan Popkin stressed the importance of guiding a writer toward understanding "his own use of terms, to be certain they were used appropriately, to be sure they were used to his own best rhetorical advantage" (19). We agree. Social work graduate students require similar guidance. When working with our students, we need to emphasize that being concise and using jargon and a particular format is not a goal in itself, but rather part of mastering an organic whole: a clear, well-supported argument.

As for faculty, we plan to design a workshop encouraging them to recognize and articulate argument in both their assignments and their responses to student papers. In addition, we remind you that this program requires a thesis. To increase students' preparation for this project from their very first year, we hope to encourage both the faculty and the administration to consider the importance of argument when they are making changes in their curriculum. Given our open and collaborative relationship with the faculty and administration, we believe that our proposals will be considered seriously.

In conclusion, being writing teachers for graduate and professional students entails developing both knowledge and vocabulary about their field. Graduate writing is different from undergraduate writing because of the level of specialization and detail. Equally important, we must be acutely aware of the special purpose of and motivation behind each piece of graduate and professional writing we read.

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